

The History of New Literacies and Application of Twitter in the Classroom

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Abstract

Teaching in the 21st century brings about challenges of its own. One of these is the question “What is text?” New Literacies and Web 2.0 have helped redefine what text is. Our interaction with these new literacies also affects how we think and respond to texts. This inquiry paper examines a brief history of how new literacies came about from Industrial Revolutions and the beginning of a post-industrial mindset. It also looks at how new literacies affect our reading and writing, especially those of students who are growing up surrounded by it. Finally, it specifically narrows in on microblogging via Twitter as one of the first new literacies a teacher may want to attempt to use in the classroom. The goal of this inquiry paper is to provide information to assure teachers that new literacies are not a fad and have been developing for quite some time. It is also to provide ideas for teachers and coaches on how to encourage other teachers to change their mindsets to embrace new literacies and use them in their classrooms.

Introduction

What is a text? When we were students, we would probably say that textbooks, novels, and articles were text. However, in this digital age, the definition of text has metamorphosed. Looking at something as “simple” as the Internet can show us how reading has changed. Text layout includes vibrant colors, images, and graphics that share information. In fact, many websites include videos, photographs, and music! Suddenly the text we are reading is multimodal. Reading online allows us to receive information in a nonlinear fashion. Hyperlinks can connect us to other sites, which support or define what we are reading. Choice now plays a bigger role in our reading options as we can pursue the information relevant or interesting to us. We also have a greater opportunity to share our thoughts and information with a wide audience. We can publish information via a Blog or Twitter or communicate on other sites or blogs and discuss concepts or interests with people all over the world! This Inquiry Paper is to explore the issue of new literacies, how they affect our concepts and practice of reading and writing, and specifically how Twitter and microblogging can be used by students and staff in an effective way.

I am a literacy coach, so my job concerns sharing innovative teaching techniques with teachers as well as fostering professional development and conversations among colleagues. This inquiry paper is important, to me because teachers need to know and be aware of the world our students interact with. They need to understand that the skills students need to interact with in our world are changing. I need to understand how to explain these changes to teachers, and be able to persuade them to try something new. Having an understanding of how things have changed and data to support this idea will help me explain the need for changing our instructional techniques. I can model the use of technology, specifically microblogging, through encouraging professional discussion and development as well as finding innovative ways to incorporate this technology in classroom lessons. I chose microblogging,

because the commitment is not as daunting as a blog where the perception is you are writing essays. 140 characters is a succinct message. The most important reason for this information on new literacy is because I will need to show that this shift in thinking and the use of technology that corresponds to this new thinking is *relevant* and not just another fad.

Literature Review

I decided the first place I needed to start in my research was looking for a framework to explain the changes in the way we read and write and how we interpret and digest information in the 21st century. When did these changes occur? What caused them? Chapter 3 of Lankshear and Knobel's (2003) New Literacies : Changing Knowledge and Classroom Learning provides an historical look at how new literacies are a challenge to most mindsets. Most of us are familiar with the physical world that is around us, but in our contemporary world we also deal with "cyberspace" which is not physical, but still a space where we interact and create. It can definitely feel and see like a physical space. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) cite Bell and Touraine's research from the 1970's which documented the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial paradigm. Instead of manufacturing goods, information and services were the new products. Science and technology were needed to create these new goods, not just labor.

Another major event that brought us closer to the digital age, according to Castells (1996) were two Industrial Revolutions. The first, at the end of the 18th Century, replaced hand tools with machines. Humans did not have to do as much physical labor, and work could be more efficient and productive as a machine could hypothetically work faster and mass produce an item instead of limited handcrafted items. The second, Industrial Revolution, around 100 years later, saw the discovery of electricity, internal combustion, chemicals, and new communication through the telegraph and telephone. We see these innovations continue in our modern times as our devices have become more complex and

smaller. Power is no longer a physical material but information and data held in microchips. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) point out that while there is a physical “limit” to cyberspace in the sense of server space, there is really no limit to what can be added to or “consumed” in cyberspace. Unlike the physical world, information and data cannot be spent by one person and therefore not present for another. There is room for multiple blogs, wikis, and webspaces where a physical classroom only has so much room for so many chairs. The presence of cyberspace has to change our view of the world. No longer are we limited in communication and interaction with our neighborhood or coworkers. Competition for jobs is no longer limited by location. We are not limited in how much information we can share online, and we are not limited in the amount of information we read or interact with online! Using cyberspace can allow us to see things in other countries, be aware of events, and stay as connected as we wish to the world around us.

So let’s look at an example of how cyberspace and the digital world have changed the way we do something. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) refer to Bezos’ 2nd phase automation when looking at how new technologies allow us to do something in a different manner. 1st phase automation is using technology to make a job more efficient, but the task is still the same, such as using a scanner to price items at a checkout counter. However, an example of 2nd phase automation might be as simple as purchasing a book on Amazon.com. It takes the experience of buying a book to a new level, because there are reviews and comments from people who have read the book. Based on previous purchases, Amazon.com might suggest other titles that we might want to read. Our book purchasing experience has just altered. Now we are not just a consumer buying a book, but we can review titles, critique books, communicate with others concerning books, and therefore are more active in the process of purchasing a book. If we do not purchase books online, we may not be aware of how the experience of most of our students differs from walking into Borders to buy a book. We may not realize that the

online actions of book browsing offer opportunities for interaction and “real life” applications for critique and review of novels. There may also be times when we don’t make connections between a student’s online experiences and how those experiences translate into face to face skills. For example, Hawisher et al,(2004) state that perhaps chatting online via Instant Messaging might improve a student’s sense of dialogue for classroom discussions.

Now that we understand a little about how the world and our mindsets have changed to adapt to our digital world, how does this outlook affect our reading and writing? Bruce (1998) helps us understand that our “new” literacies are actually part of a rich history of how humans have communicated with each other. Our symbol system that we use currently has roots back in prehistoric times to the symbols painted on the walls of caves. New technologies in past times opened doors to different types of communication. For example, once people began to write, permanent documents made education a possibility not to mention the whole study of history (Bruce, 1998). We have to remember that just as past generations have resisted and then adapted to the changes in technology and communication, we too must change our conceptions of communication. We also have to keep in mind that because we have different technologies and they offer different ways of communication, this doesn’t mean that one technology is “better” but that they offer different ways of connecting (Hawisher, Selfe, Moraski, & Pearson, 2004).

NCTE’s (2008) “Reading and Writing Differently” addresses how reading and writing is changing for the digital age. The Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse shares Reeves’ definition of Literacy 2.0 as “the social and technological phenomenon that enables users to generate content, interact, and share information across borders” (1). The article opens with some interesting quotes from “modern” students concerning reading and writing, especially in “traditional” experiences (NCTE, 2008). One student comments on the easy use of Sparknotes to “read” a book. He understands that he’s

cheating himself, but there aren't enough hours in the day to read the whole book when he could get the main points in 5 minutes. Another student comments on the difference between an online community that allowed role playing, creating, and equality as opposed to school with grades, hierarchical relationships, and constant rules. Their publication calls to attention the fact that non-school writing, like texting, blogs, Facebook, etc. allow for a collaborative experience not common in school. It challenges teachers to build "connections between non-school and school based literacy practices" (16). This means that teachers need to be aware of what reading and writing students enjoy outside of the classroom and understand how they can tap into the energy of those activities when creating school assignments. A student comments on the fact that there is little use of dynamic technology in class. The student knows his/her personal interactions with technology will benefit him/her in the future, and he/she wisely comments that those things we are interested in teach us more than those which are spoon-fed to us (Hawisher et al, 2004). As educators we need to tap into using technology for our projects and assignments in order to give students these experiences, especially those who may not have Internet or computer access at home. This comment also illustrates that the design of our lesson matters just as much as the use of technology. If we have students copy lecture notes onto a laptop, then the technology is not being wisely used. Our classroom activities need to lead to discovery and allow for students to explore and problem solve without us giving every answer to them right away.

NCTE (2008) helps to further explain and define what makes the new literacy so different. Some of these changes are that there is a visual and design element to websites which we have seen influence textbook design as well. The variety of media in online documents allows for music, images, words, and video to merge together in one text. The interactive nature of Web 2.0 is creating a culture that allows for interaction and discussion more than a "read-only" approach. Media like Twitter allow these conversations and connections to continue outside of the classroom and with members of the

community. As writers, students can take on many identities, such as characters from a book, and therefore connect more strongly with the characters and the ideas presented in the book. Fan-fiction and fan sites allow students to “rewrite” and recreate stories for their favorite characters. Finally, digital literacy connects students and teachers to others around the world. We are no longer limited in our communication to those people who live in our location. It is a telling sign when President Obama was called our first “wired” President. A CNN interview (2009) explained that Obama wanted to be able to keep his blackberry despite security risks because he wanted to be connected to other opinions besides those who worked with him. He also wanted an opportunity to send a message to others about what’s happening in America (Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse, 2009, p.4) The way that we communicate has changed not only for students, but for adults too.

I realize that I may encounter teachers who argue and doubt that the world has changed enough to change how we read and write and perhaps even how we learn and gather information. Why does it seem that some teachers or administrators are reluctant to embrace new technology? O’Brien (2010) says that for some people, their experience of computers is based on the past when computers were costly and programs not readily available. These people, stuck in the past, are not aware that the cost of computers has been reduced, that many teachers are now finding digital media as supplemental to print, and that Internet access is becoming more available to all people allowing them to interact in new ways. There seems to be debate in how to name those who are comfortable with technology and the new literacies and those who are not. O’Brien (2010) states that some people use age to talk about digital immigrants, or people who were not born during a time when technology was used frequently. These are the people who remember how we located information B.G.-- Before Google. Others argue that age should not be part of the definition. The only consensus is that people are either visitors or residents when it comes to technology use. Something that may help reluctant teachers consider the new

literacies is visiting You Tube and viewing ‘Did you Know 3.0,’ which shows how our world has changed and how technologies that didn’t exist are now ruling (O’Brien, 2010). Another suggested video is “Web 2.0 . . . The Machines are Us/ing Us”, which cleverly illustrates the difference between hypertext and pen and paper communication (O’Brien, 2010). These videos definitely make you consider the current technology and communication possibilities, and the fact that they are visual only helps emphasize that we are not in a world dominated by print anymore.

Now that we know more about what makes the new literacies different, and are considering how to encourage other teachers to embrace new ways of thinking and teaching, what are we supposed to do with this knowledge? The Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse (2009) offers some practical ways to stay informed of current technologies as well as steps to encourage others to start experiencing and thinking about the new literacies. They suggest exploring online resources for the organizations you belong to like the NCTE or the IRA, finding a mentor who uses technology and will encourage your growth, and joining Twitter or another social network that would allow you to connect with other coaches and share information. There were also several coaching blogs that were listed. These are all great ways to use the digital information to enhance coaches’ teaching strategies to share with their staff. O’Brien (2010) offers similar suggestions, especially to help “old dogs” learn “new tricks.” He suggests following blogs, saving and sharing bookmarks on Delicious, making a student the “tech wizard” of your classroom, and introducing yourself to the Technology Integration Specialist. One of the most practical ideas was picking one technology to start small with and use frequently. Essentially, both of these sources encourage participating in the new media available, finding colleagues to support your growth, and patiently using these new ways in your classroom.

One particular new media that is of interest to me is Twitter, or microblogging. I think that it is “short” enough to encourage a teacher to write every day as a blog might be intimidating since one

thinks they need to write an essay. I think Twitter appeals to students who like to be concise, and for those students who would write every piece of information hoping something is correct, it forces them to be concise. Reinhardt, Ebner, Beham, & Costa (2009) explored the usefulness of microblogging for fast exchanges of information. One aspect of communicating via Twitter that interested them was that you can hashtag a tweet. This allows information sharing concerning a specific topic or event to be more organized and shared more quickly. They also pointed out how Twitter might be beneficial in large room presentations or lectures. Reinhardt et. al (2009) note that these large room learning situations do not generally allow for much interaction. They see Twitter as a way to allow feedback from the audience during the lecture, it relieves any stress one might have to ask a question, and increases participation of the audience. They then applied this knowledge to using Twitter at conferences. They suggest that before a conference Twitter could be used to announce events and remind attendees of notices. Those attending a conference can coordinate their plans using Twitter. During a conference, attendees can check for last minute updates, upload pictures or links which are valuable to those attending and those unable to attend the conference, take personal notes, ask questions, or discuss specific topics with other attendees after a workshop. After a conference, Twitter can be used to thank attendees or post reflections. Their study of Twitter use at a conference shows that many people attending had Twitter accounts before the conference and use Twitter for personal and professional reasons. Users sent between 11-20 messages a day at the conference. Many enjoyed the ability to discuss in deeper depth the information presented by a speaker (Reinhardt et al, 2009).

Besides using Twitter in a professional manner, Twitter is a way to foster relationships concerning teachers' or students' life outside the classroom. Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009) looked to Twitter to help create social interactions for their online classes in order to build the interactions and relationships that will foster stronger education, especially critical when students and teachers are not

meeting face to face. “When faculty stay in touch with students through formal and informal communication and dialogue, students report that it helps them get through the rough days and keep on working (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009, p. 130).” The current process of using a Learning Management System (LMS) proved to be detrimental to creating social interactions due to the complexity of logging in to communicate. This limited when students or teachers logged in and how often they communicated. The ability to use Twitter to have “just-in-time” conversations that were informal and flowed around a person’s thoughts or questions and not whether they were logged in, provided a more authentic social interaction. For example, a student tweets a question from the chapter he is reading. In 10 mins, he/she gets 3 responses. A student finds a great resource from another person’s tweets and retweets it to his followers too (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009).

This might be likened to the “affinity spaces” mentioned by Knobel and Lankshear (2009) which are created by users of social networks. The “affinity spaces” allow people with similar interests and passions to join together. Sometimes, the people are of different competencies, so learning can occur through these social interactions. Often our online experiences allow us to find affinity spaces based on favorite movies, bands, books, hobbies, or other activities. Our friends may not share excitement for our interests, but online we can find others like us and communicate our enthusiasm with likeminded individuals.

Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009) also found other benefits to using Twitter besides the social aspect which mainly corresponds with Reinhardt, Ebner, Beham, & Costa’s (2009) observations of Twitter at conferences. It allowed issues to get addressed quickly as opposed to waiting for the next time someone was logged into the LMS. The 140 character limit forced students to be concise when they wrote. It nourished growth provided by a professional community as well as informal, self-directed learning. One of the most interesting benefits was that it allowed teachers and students to

communicate after the class was over. This is a unique feature of social networking, such as Facebook, which allows you to communicate with students once they have left the physical space of your classroom or school. The use of Twitter allowed students and teachers to learn in a new way. The learning was not limited to their time together in a physical or online class. Twitter allowed them to be able to interact and grow continuously, even once the class was over.

Reader Response

This information confirms much of what I have noticed and have read about 21st century skills and learning. Looking at this historical overview of “how we got here” helps me understand where and how the shift in thinking came about, and that is something I can share with others who may question whether the world has changed at all. I especially found the history interesting because while I have grown up during this “revolution,” I have not really consciously thought about how the changes in technology and the Internet have affected me. I have noticed web design getting more visual, I have used blogs and technology professionally and personally, but had not really thought about how that affected my ability to locate information, how I sort through so much information, and how I use technology to connect with others. Learning about Twitter and our discussions and activities in class, such as your introduction of Nings to us, made me realize that I was missing out on communicating and using the Internet beyond personal communication. Twitter is fun when used in a personal manner, but after I started following teachers that were part of your follow list, it became a much more valuable tool. There were articles, images, thoughts that got me thinking, too. It was more valuable than a daily journal.

I have also had experiences with teachers who fondly recall the way teaching “used to be.” Most teachers have embraced technology, but we also need to move our mindsets past the way we were taught. Students need to be more active in their role at school, and teachers need to be more like

guides than lecturers. We need to give students chances to struggle with problems and new concepts on their own before giving them the answers. We also need to listen to students and find what engages them and interests them. We need to tap into these activities, whether it be through technology or our lesson plans. I do see the divide between teachers who embrace technology and are fully immersed in its applications and those who are visiting the realm. I do not think age is a proper way to divide these interactions, but it seems like willingness to try and finding meaning in the technology's use are driving teachers to embrace risks that we are being asked to take.

As I did the research, I noticed that scholarly articles were beginning to address digital literacy. Many, like my inquiry paper, were starting with the history and rationale behind starting the discussion of how we change to fit the digital age. I was surprised that there were not more articles about Twitter's use in the classroom. Many articles listed several social networking options, but did not explicitly share ways to use these technologies. However, contemporary magazines (mostly online like Wired), blogs, and other sites were full of teacher ideas for Twitter. It made me wonder if the Internet has changed the way scholarly journals will be produced as their competition is now online. Information is easier to find and locate, and the people writing it seem knowledgeable. I would imagine that scholarly journals will soon be more specific in how certain sites and programs can be used in the classroom in order to catch up with this gap of information.

The research I found for Twitter will help me as I try and encourage other teachers to use Twitter or something like it to communicate socially and professionally with students and staff. This information gave the data and information that will help teachers see Twitter as a tool and not a toy. Other research that was not from scholarly sources will give me a chance to learn more about applications of Twitter in classroom assignments. Even articles discussing business applications can be

adapted to my purposes at school. The research definitely convinced me to use Twitter (or Facebook as I know many teachers are on there already) as a professional tool and not just for “fun” aspects.

Future Research

There were many interesting authors whose names appeared in the research I read. I would like to read more of Lankshear and Knobel and Manuel Castells to understand an historical approach to new literacies. I think this would help me as I talk to teachers about why teachers have to adapt their teaching to our students, instead of having them adapt to school circa 1980. It seems like the essential books would be Lankshear and Knobel's *New Literacies: Changing Knowledge and Classroom Learning*. Manuel Castell's *Rise of the Network Society* is another book that I would like to read as his name was referred in Lankshear and Knobel. I also found that Lankshear and Knobel have a website with articles, which could be beneficial reading as well: <http://everydayliteracies.net/>

I also noticed that there are several online communities I need to take advantage of. One is a New Literacies Ning: <http://newlitcollaborative.ning.com/>. O'Brien (2010) shares some blogs to follow such as www.speedofcreativity.org and theinnovativeeducator.blogspot.com. These will help me focus on new literacies, stay current with the types of new literacies and issues surrounding new literacies.

I also found some good resources as a Literacy Coach. One is the Literacy Coach Ning: <http://literacycoaches.ning.com/>. There are also some interesting blogs like: <http://jimknightoncoaching.squarespace.com/> and <http://literacycoachonline.wordpress.com/>. These would help me connect with other literacy coaches, because there are only three total middle school literacy coaches in our district, and the experience of a coach differs from a classroom teacher. This would allow me extra resources and conversation.

This class and the research also inspired me to investigate more writings of Marshall McLuhan and David Thornburg. Both of these men and their writings and ideas were featured in my Instructional Technology Master's Degree program. I know they talk a lot about the medium and communication in our digital age.

Finally, I want to continue to use Twitter. I would like to try and see if I can get teachers at Crenshaw to join Twitter as a sort of "virtual" teaching lounge. I don't know if it's possible, but I think it would be nice. Actually, many of the teachers are already on Facebook, so I may choose to use that as a professional social network for our teachers. I do want to continue using Twitter because I am amazed at the information and connections I can find. I want to find ways to apply Twitter to class assignments as I think it's the closest to texting our students will do at school. If the site isn't blocked, of course!

These resources are nothing but links on my pages if I don't use them and visit them! I plan on making a sort of "calendar" of time to visit the sites so that I won't be overwhelmed with the information I need to read. I also hope to continue to log into Twitter daily to check tweets for information. I also hope to continue to blog at least weekly. I find this very reflective, and it helps me archive information that I may wish to share with teachers or use in a classroom. Finally, I hope to stay connected with my fellow teachers in the class and also with you and follow our blogs and communicate with all of you. Even though we were together for a week physically, I feel like our communication and online blogging has connected me to everyone.

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